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The Nine Biggest Marketing Mistakes Contractors Make

By [Pamela Girardin](#) & [Becky Sheetz-Runkle](#), [Q2 Marketing](#)

Generally speaking, government contractors view marketing very differently than their private sector counterparts. Some employ sophisticated and integrated marketing programs. Others rely almost solely on face-to-face relationship building. Others rely almost exclusively on churning out proposals. Over the years, we've seen many marketing pitfalls that plague federal contractors. Does your firm make any of these common mistakes?

1. Leading with 8a, SDB, woman-owned, etc. While these are important factors in the grand scheme, they really don't define your company's value proposition. There are many contractors who fit these definitions. Your message should focus on what you have to offer in selling against these other firms. What is your company's vision and how do you implement it?
2. Failing to see marketing's role in driving revenue, gaining market share and shaping mindshare. Too often the role of marketing for the entire organization—even healthy mid-sized organizations—is relegated to an entry level professional with no real hands-on marketing experience. And so, despite his or her best intentions, the cycle of marketing being unable to help drive revenue for the organization continues. This issue speaks again to your company's mission. How are you/should you invest in marketing to achieve your mission?
3. Positioning the company too generally. This is a problem for many young firms, as well as companies that have been around for years. They are fearful of defining themselves too narrowly and losing opportunities. As a result, they position themselves as all things to all people. But this too-broad strategy almost always ends up being "nothing to nobody." Even the ultra-large firms have definitive practice areas and solution sets. They know where they play and where they don't, and they continue to grow based on that model. Contractors need to put all the wood behind one arrowhead and clearly define what they do (solution sets) and who they do it for (industry verticals or specific agencies).
4. Downplaying the positives. Proven performance is the mainstay of the contractor looking to grow both within and beyond current agency relationships. It's essential to use your past performance to your advantages in case studies and testimonials on the web, in PR opportunities, and in programs that make sense for your firm. Ask yourself how best you can leverage your past performance to win more business. Then be bold in sharing your proven experiences with the marketplace.
5. Not choosing the right marketing programs that best fit your goals and objectives. Marketing is a broad universe that includes a multitude of different programs. And because executives don't always understand marketing's impact on the bottom line, sometimes all marketing programs are viewed with skepticism. This "throw the baby out with the bathwater" mentality is counterproductive. Pick programs that are appropriate based on your budget and target audience. How are your sales made? For some organizations, trade shows work best. Companies that seek to be perceived as thought leaders will emphasize PR, white papers and speaking strategies. What programs do you need?
6. Failing to see yourself as a prospect would see you. Honestly assess the impression your company makes throughout the prospect-to-sales conversion. What kind of impression do your touch points make, from your Web site to collateral to proposals, to programs such as trade show displays, newsletters, direct mail, etc.? Do these materials portray you in ways that would motivate a prospect to buy from you? Or are the message and imagery inconsistent, dated, confusing, or simply uninspiring?
7. Getting entrenched in one or two agencies, but not being able to reach out beyond them. A loyal client base is fantastic. But a loyal client base that is too limiting can pose a major problem. Relationships are very important. Referrals are too. But eventually they'll level out—along with your growth. You need to keep the pipeline full. Strategic marketing has incredible potential to empower business development and client acquisition—but only when it's part of your strategic plan and empowered to drive revenue.
8. Misunderstanding the competitive landscape. This is a mistake made by many young firms, or more established firms with a new product or solution. They aren't honest with themselves, and understate the competition. It's essential to have a SWOT understanding of the competition in order to market and sell against them.
9. Thinking we're too _____ for strategic marketing investments. That blank can be filled with lots of adjectives such as: small, niche, unique. So what if you're not an ultra large firm? You don't have their budget or their reputation. But chances are you still need a constant sales pipeline. You just need to be smart about where and how you are spending your marketing dollars. And you need to see marketing not as an expense, but as an investment in the continued growth of your company.

These are the most common marketing mistakes contractors make. If you identify with some of them, you aren't alone. But now may be the time to step back, assess the role of marketing as a competitive advantage for your organization, and consider what you have to gain from addressing these challenges head on.

Pamela Girardin is President of Q2 Marketing. For nearly 20 years, Pamela has helped technology companies develop marketing programs built around business objectives and driving revenue. Becky Sheetz-Runkle is Vice President, Client Services for Q2 Marketing. She's spent her career architecting strategic marketing programs for B2G and B2B companies in the IT space. Visit www.Q2marketing.com for more information or call 703-273-2990.

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